

Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact

1 INTRODUCTION

The South Platte Ranger District of the Pike and San Isabel National Forest proposes to treat approximately 9,574 acres within the 22,729 acre Crossons-Longview Project Area to move the montane forest ecosystem towards historic conditions. The treatments would reduce wildfire hazards and improve the health of the forest. The 9,574 acres of treatment contain ponderosa pine, Douglas-fir, mixed conifer, lodgepole pine, aspen and shrublands (Figure 1). Specific actions would be dependent on site-specific conditions and the vegetation type, however, actions would include thinning, created openings and prescribed burning. A combination of mechanical harvesting equipment and hand treatment would be used. No new systems roads would be constructed, however some temporary roads would be used.

2 DECISION

I have decided to implement Alternative B - Proposed Action in the Environmental Assessment (EA). This decision was made following review of the EA, supporting materials referenced by the EA, and additional information contained in the Decision Notice.

2.1 INFORMATION RELEVANT TO MY DECISION

The following are the key pieces of information that relate to my decision.

The purpose of the proposed project is to restore sustainable forest conditions that are resilient to fire, insects, and diseases, while providing for diverse wildlife habitats, recreational opportunities, and sustainable watershed conditions. Past forest management has created forests that are susceptible to large-scale disturbance such as high intensity fire and insect outbreaks. The proposed project would respond to a need to reduce the potential of these events by using targeted vegetative treatments to reduce the likelihood of large-scale, high intensity wildfires and improve resiliency of the forest to insects and disease. Tree thinning, prescribed burning, and/or other fuel reduction methods can substantially reduce the occurrence of high intensity fires, improve the health of the remaining trees and increase vegetative diversity. These measures would create healthier forest conditions that are closer to the more open and diverse historical forest structure. The actions proposed would additionally protect watersheds, enhance wildlife habitat and provide for enhanced recreation opportunities.

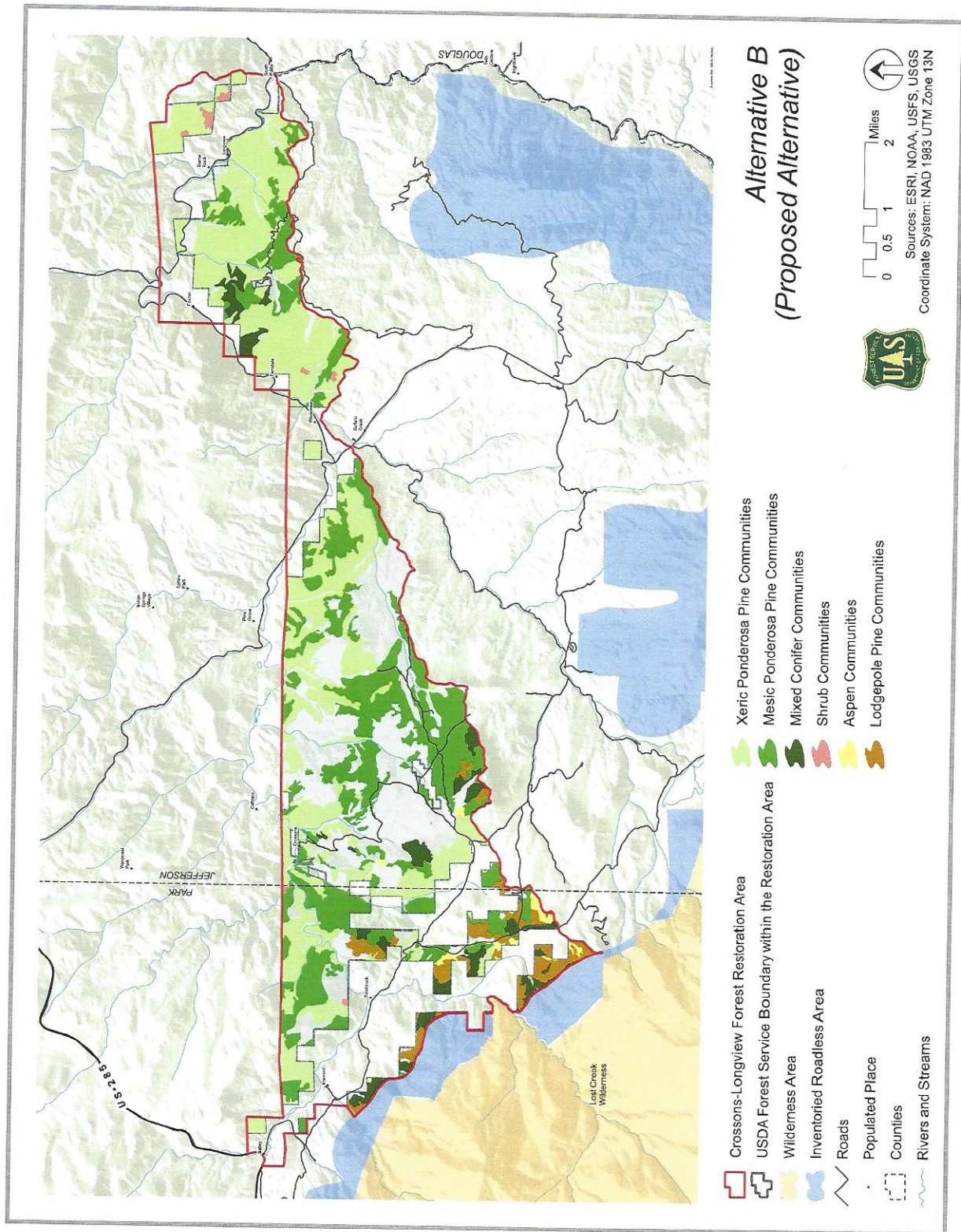


Figure 1. Alternative B - Proposed Action Treatments Map

The current forest conditions are the result of a combination of intense, landscape-scale historical logging, large stand replacing fires during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and aggressive fire suppression efforts. These past actions have created overly dense stands of nearly uniform age and species. The forest structure today is one of more even-aged, mature trees that can carry fire both vertically and horizontally with higher intensity and severity than would have occurred in the more open and diverse historical condition. This has led to an increase in the risk of high intensity wildfires in, and around, the Project Area.

The juxtaposition of the current forest conditions with local water, recreation, and other natural and developed resources is of great concern. There are hundreds of homes, critical watersheds and significant associated infrastructure adjacent to and near the Project Area that are at risk of damage should a high intensity wildfire occur in the area. The steadily increasing population and associated development will proportionately increase this risk in the future. Meanwhile, wildfires have increased by number of incidents, intensity, and acres burned within and nearby the Project Area.

The need to reduce forest fuels has been clearly demonstrated by the recent large-scale, high intensity fires occurring across the western United States and in the Front Range of Colorado. The Hayman Fire, as well as several other recent fires on the Pike and San Isabel National Forests, destroyed homes, infrastructure and other property on private and public lands; damaged critical watersheds; imperiled fish and wildlife habitat; and reduced recreational opportunities. Subsequent run-off from severe thunderstorms during the monsoon season over the fire-denuded areas eroded soils, leading to flooding and sediment and debris flows that destroyed homes, damaged highways and various other facilities, and degraded fisheries.

The watersheds in the Project Area are critical community resources as they are a source of the domestic water supply for metropolitan Denver. The North Fork South Platte River, a critical water supply for the Denver Water Department, runs through the Project Area, transporting runoff and water diverted from the western slope to Strontia Springs Reservoir. Strontia Springs Reservoir, which is just downstream of the Project Area, has already been substantially impacted by sediment and debris flows from several recent wildfires.

The Crossons-Longview Forest Restoration Project responds to the identified purpose and need by proposing vegetative treatments that would improve forest conditions by increasing resiliency to large-scale, high intensity fire and damage from insects and diseases, while providing for improved diversity of wildlife habitat, enhanced recreational opportunities, and reduced risk of damage to watersheds. The specific purposes of this project are:

1. To reduce the potential of large-scale, high intensity wildfire with uncontrollable fire behavior, such as active crown fire.
2. To reduce the potential that a wildfire would negatively affect public water supplies from subsequent severe flooding and sedimentation.
3. To improve forest health, vigor, and resilience to large-scale fire, insects and disease.
4. To enhance wildlife habitat through the reduction of the potential for large-scale, high intensity wildfires, enhancement of shrublands and aspen habitat, and Pawnee montane skipper habitat.

2.2 REASONS FOR MY DECISION

Substantive Comments on the EA

There were no substantive comments received during the objection period.

Key Issues

The key issues are forest conditions, reduction of fuel loads, watershed damage, management indicator species and special status species habitat, cultural resources, economics and road access. These issues are directly addressed by the Alternative B - Proposed Action.

Public Involvement

The public involvement effort is documented in the EA (page 4).

Alternatives Considered

Three alternatives were considered. Alternative A was the no action alternative. Two action alternatives were considered; Alternative B - Proposed Action and Alternative C which did not allow temporary roads.

3 FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

I have determined that these actions will not significantly affect the quality of the biological, physical or human environment. Therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement will not be prepared. This determination is based on the following factors and the effects analysis documented in the EA, in light of the following factors listed in 40 CFR 1508.27.

3.1 CONTEXT

The EA contains effects analyses that provide appropriate context for this project. Significance was evaluated in terms of both short and long-term effects, and several scales were used.

3.2 INTENSITY

Environmental Impacts

I find there are no significant impacts due to this project. Some short-term, less than significant effects have been identified in the EA. However, all the proposed actions would pose minimal, short-term impacts to the area. The actions would create a more sustainable, long-term environment.

Public Health or Safety

I find there are no adverse effects on public health and safety. This project would reduce the potential of large-scale, high intensity wildfires with uncontrollable fire behavior, such as active crown fire, reducing hazards to public health and safety.

Unique Characteristics of the Area

I find there are no significant effects on unique characteristics such as historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, or wild and scenic rivers. Forest lands would not be adversely affected and there are no prime farmlands or wild and scenic rivers in the activity areas.

Controversy

This project is not controversial. No substantive comments were received during the scoping period.

Uncertainty

I find the effects analysis shows the effects are not uncertain and do not involve unique or unknown risks.

Precedent

This decision does not set a precedent for future decisions. This type of project has been accomplished before throughout this region and the western United States.

Cumulative Impact

This action does not represent potential cumulative adverse impacts when considered in combination with other past or reasonably foreseeable actions. All activities together are not expected to have a cumulatively significant impact (see EA Chapter 3).

Properties on or Eligible for the National Register of Historic Places; Significant Resources

I find the action will not cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources because the treatment areas will be surveyed and analyzed. Based upon that survey and analysis, any significant resources will be avoided or appropriate mitigation will be applied that will be approved by the Colorado State Historic Preservation Office.

Endangered or Threatened Species

I find the action may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect the federally listed endangered or threatened species and their critical habitat (see Biological Assessment/Biological Evaluation).

Legal Requirements for Environmental Protection

I find the action is consistent with federal, state, and local laws and requirements for the protection of the environment. Applicable laws and regulations were considered in the EA. The action is consistent with the Pike/San Isabel Land and Resource Management Plan (EA Chapter 3).

Based on the above, I find that there are no significant impacts; therefore, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared.

3.3 FOREST PLAN CONSISTENCY

The proposed action is consistent with the Pike/San Isabel Land and Resource Management Plan.

3.4 FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS

I find that my decision is consistent with the wide variety of laws, regulations, and policies that guide management of National Forest System lands. These include but are not limited to:

Multiple Use and Sustained Yield Act

The selected alternative is in compliance with the Multiple Use and Sustained Yield Act.

National Environmental Policy Act

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) provisions have been followed as required by 40 CFR 1500. The EA considered a reasonable range of alternatives, including the required No Action alternative. It also disclosed the expected impacts of each alternative and discussed the identified issues and concerns. This Decision Notice describes the decision I have made and my rationale for the decision.

Healthy Forests Restoration Act

This EA has been prepared under the policies of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA) and is in compliance with it.

Floodplains, Wetlands, or Municipal Watersheds

There are no significant floodplains or municipal watersheds that would trigger a positive finding for extraordinary circumstances under this criterion.

Endangered Species Act

The analysis and decision meets all requirements of the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

National Historic Preservation Act

The selected alternative complies with the provisions of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA). If previously unidentified sites are identified within the project area of potential effect, measures will be taken to assure full compliance with the NHPA and the Colorado State Historical Preservation Office.

Clean Air Act

The use of fire within the Project Area will follow current and future regulations and management direction, which will allow the proposed activity to be in compliance with state and federal air quality regulations and laws.

Clean Water Act

Implementation of best management practices will allow the proposed activity to be in compliance with state and federal water quality regulations and laws.

National Forest Management Act

The selected alternative is in compliance with the National Forest Management Act (36 CFR 219.27).

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities and Implementation Date

This decision is not subject to appeal under 36 CFR Part 215 because it was prepared under the HFRA regulations. The 30-day objection period will be completed on August 16, 2015. This decision is expected to be implemented beginning in April 2016.

Signature and Date

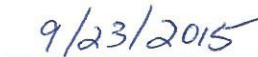


Brian Banks, District Ranger

South Platte Ranger District

Pike and San Isabel National Forests

Responsible Official



Date